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ABSTRACT

This study compares the effectiveness of two approaches to teaching survival reading skills to 50 semi-literate adults. One group was given reading instruction from high interest-low vocabulary reading materials at appropriate levels of difficulty according to their results on the Gray Oral Reading Test, Form A. The second group was given reading instruction in materials selected because of their frequency of use in daily activities, such as newspapers, magazines, forms for welfare payments, driver's licenses, appliance warranties, and job applications with no attention given to the readability level of any of the materials. Following four months of small group tutoring three times a week, both groups were retested with Form B of the Gray Oral and were administered a questionnaire to assess their feelings about the program and how much they felt it helped them. The second group made significant gains on the post-test and also had more positive feelings about the program. Findings indicated that increases in performance were more closely related to motivation than to instructional materials. (Author/TO)

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"Teaching Educationally Disadvantaged Adults to Read"
Session: Teaching Adults to Read
Thursday, May 3, 1973
10:45 - 11:45 a.m.

Because of a feeling held by this author that adult education has not been paid the proper attention in terms of development of programs for aiding educationally disadvantaged adults, and in terms of research related to such programs, an action research study was developed in the summer of 1972. This study, done with subjects from a black ghetto area of St. Louis, Missouri, from May through August, was intended to serve two functions:

1. To improve the reading skills of semi-literate adults; and
2. To provide information regarding the influence of certain instructional materials in achieving this reading skill.

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There were essentially two factors operating in this second part of the study which made it quite significant. The first was the constant suggestion by most book and material publishers that the way to solve reading problems was to put books in the hands of these semi-literate adults which were written at a very low difficulty level, but a high interest level. The second was a study by Sticht and others (1) which appeared in the Spring, 1972, issue of the Reading Research Quarterly. The purpose of that study was to determine functional literacy levels for selected Army jobs into which many lower aptitude men were assigned. In the study, the authors examined readability levels of three job manuals (cook, general vehicle repairman, and supply clerk), and the relationships between a man's reading ability as measured by standardized tests and his performance on these job reading tasks. Findings indicated that the reading difficulty levels of the materials exceeded the average reading ability levels of the men by from four to eight grade levels, yet job performance by these men was generally adequate. The two major conclusions of the authors were that any readability formula scaled on grade school material and children's comprehension of that material is not useful with adult-type materials, and that the apparent motivation of a job-oriented task may be an extremely important factor.

At any rate, these items were the primary bases in the development of this study.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine if an intensive teaching of reading skills to semi-literate adults would result in significant

improvement of their reading skills; and, if so, to determine if the materials used for instructional purposes significantly affected the improvement. Also, the students' feelings about the program were assessed to see if any interaction existed between instructional materials and self-perception related to improved reading ability.

Hypotheses

The study resulted in the statistical treatment of several research hypotheses which were derived from the following questions:

Among semi-literate adults, does the use of high-interest low-vocabulary instructional materials provide greater gains in reading than the use of materials encountered frequently in daily activities; does the use of either of these types of materials result in more positive feelings about the instructional program; and does the type of instructional material used interact with the students' feelings about the program?

Procedure

The subjects of this study were 50 black adults, both male and female, ages ranging from 24 to 53 years, who lived in a federally-sponsored housing project in St. Louis, Missouri. They had volunteered for participation in this literacy program and entered with high degrees of enthusiasm. Of the group involved, none had a high school diploma or its equivalent, and only 29 of the 50 had ever attended high school. The actual range of educational levels (years of schooling) was from grade 3 through grade 10. From this original group, 2 sub-groups were selected randomly before any testing or instruction took place. These two were arbitrarily designated as Group A and Group B, with 25 subjects in each one.

After assignment to a group, each subject was administered Form A of the Gray Oral Reading Test, an individually administered reading test which reports results in terms of grade level equivalents. Results of this test were used for two purposes: first, to provide base line data for comparison at the end of the program; and second, to provide information about instructional materials to be used with members of Group A, which were to be at or near the members' reading levels. Of importance to this report was the finding that the two groups were relatively alike in terms of their reading ability prior to any instruction. Group A had a mean grade equivalent of 4.7 with a range from 3.0 to 8.3, while Group B had a mean grade of 4.8 and a range from 3.0 to 8.8.

After gathering the preliminary information, a program of instruction was developed for each group, but not for each individual within the groups. Each group met for one hour, three times per week, for four months. During these instructional periods (Group A from 9:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. and Group B from 10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.), the instruction was presented in as nearly identical a way as possible. A reading skill was introduced, discussed, and practiced, then reviewed. Following that, subjects worked independently on those skills in materials selected for the purpose. The subjects in Group A worked in materials at or near their reading grade level, as established by the pre-test, but identified as "high interest" by their publishers. Subjects in Group B worked in materials chosen for their utility in daily activities, particularly the daily newspapers, magazines, driver's license forms, welfare forms, and job application forms. No attention was paid

to the readability of these materials; however, it is safe to assume that nearly all of it was of a difficulty level higher than the mean reading grade level of tne group.

Following the training period of four months, all subjects were administered Form B of the Gray Oral Reading Test to determine if gains had occurred. Also administered was a questionnaire designed to assess the feelings the subjects had about the program in general, and also their feelings about how much they thought the program had helped them.

Results

The data gathered in this study related to reading achievement were treated statistically to determine if significant gains or losses had occurred from pre-test to post-test, and to determine if such changes were significantly different between groups. The statistical technique employed was multiple linear regression, which yields an F-Ratio statistic.

Also examined were the results of the attitude questionnaire to see if either group had a more positive feeling about their program of instruction than the other, and to see if attitudes as measured by the questionnaire interacted with reading achievement.

The hypotheses, all tested at the .05 level of significance, resulted in these findings:

1. Both groups showed gains in reading achievement from pre-test to post-test. (See table 1)

2. Group B, using materials not graded in difficulty, had significantly greater gains than Group A. (See table 2)

3. Questionnaire tabulations showed that Group B had more positive feelings about their program of instruction and the gains

they felt were obtained from the program. These were not found to have a statistically significant interaction with reading achievement, however.

Discussion

Based on the above findings, it appears that the type of instructional program carried out with both groups of people in this study was effective in producing an increase in reading achievement. The length of class periods, one full hour, and the number of sessions, 48, seemed to suit the situation quite well. Also, having the classes in mid-morning seemed to be a positive factor in the program (although there is no way to substantiate that claim).

The findings seem to further bear out those of Sticht and others, that the discrepancy between reading achievement levels and readability levels is not nearly so important with adult readers as is the interest in the materials and the task motivation. The fact that both groups in this study showed gains indicates that planned, systematic instruction in reading can pay dividends to the learners involved; however, it also seems to show that no special instructional materials are necessary.

In terms of motivation and self-perception of program value, the results of the questionnaire showed clearly that those in Group B had much more positive feelings about what they learned in the program. It seems likely that this happened because of the relationship to daily "survival" activities that their instructional materials held. They perceived a need to learn to read the want ads and the job forms, while those in Group A were presented only with the need to learn to read (in general), which cut down on their over-all motivation.

Summary and Recommendations

This study, carried out with semi-literate black adults, was intended to determine if systematic reading instruction could produce gains in reading achievement, if instructional materials used would result in differences in gains between groups, and if materials used would affect perceptions of program value. Results indicated that, in fact, all of the above were true. Based on those results, the following recommendations are made:

1. Systematic adult education reading programs should be developed in all communities to help alleviate the existing literacy problems.

2. These programs should stress instruction in daily reading skills development.

3. Instructional materials should be closely related to these daily reading activities, even if their readability is higher than the reading achievement of students.

4. Replication of this study with a different population should be done to see if the results are constant enough to allow generalization and prediction.

In conclusion, it appears that increases in reading performance with the type of population studied here are more closely related to interest and applicability of instructional materials than to readability of those materials. Further research should be done to reveal more accurately the truth of these findings.

Table 1

Pre- and Post-Test Means of Groups A & B
on Gray Oral Reading Test

Group	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean
A	4.7	5.6
B	4.8	6.4
N = 50		

Table 2

Statistical Treatment Results of Gain Scores

Hypothesis	R^2 Full	R^2 Restricted	Degrees of freedom Numerator	Degrees of freedom Demoninator	F	Probability
1. There will be a statistically significant difference between pre- and post-test means for both groups	.218	.00	1	48	13.631	.00019*
2. Group B gains will be significantly greater than Group A gains	.781	.699	1	47	17.568	.00012*

alpha = .05
* = significant results
N = 50

References

Gray, William S. Gray Oral Reading Tests, Forms A and B, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967.

Stitch, Thomas G. and others. "Project Realistic: Determination of Adult Functional Literacy Skill Levels," Reading Research Quarterly, Vol. VII, No. 3 (Spring, 1972), pp. 424-465.

Teaching Reading to
Educationally Disadvantaged Adults

ABSTRACT

Compares the effectiveness of two approaches to teaching "survival" reading skills to a relatively large group of adults (50) who were semi-literate. One randomly-selected sub-group (Group A) was given reading instruction from high interest-low vocabulary reading materials at appropriate levels of difficulty according to results on the Gray Oral Reading Test, Form A. A second sub-group (Group B) was given reading instruction in materials selected because of their frequency of use in daily activities, such as the newspapers, magazines, forms for welfare payments, driver's licenses, appliance warranties, and job applications. No attention was given to the readability level of any of these materials. Following four months of small group tutoring three times per week, the groups were retested with Form B of the Gray Oral, and were administered a questionnaire to assess their feelings about the program and how much they felt it helped them. There were statistically significant differences in gains on the post-test between the two groups in favor of Group B. The questionnaire showed this group also had more positive feelings about the program. Findings indicated that increases in performance in this situation were more closely related to motivation than to instructional materials.

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